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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: IS_KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

11. Mideast

12. Lebanon Bombing

Key stories in the media:

All media highlighted Wednesday's approval by the Knesset, 59-40, with 5 abstentions, of the Disengagement Plan Implementation Law, empowering the government to pay 3.8 billion shekels (about USD 870 million) to 9,000 settlers from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank and begin evacuating them in five months. The opponents included 17 Knesset members. While the mainstream media hail the vote as "historic," pro-settler Hatzofe banners: "Zionism's Black Day." The cabinet vote to give settlers notice of the evacuation is scheduled on Sunday. Jerusalem Post quoted a source in the Prime Minister's Office as saying that PM Sharon was not likely to issue the evacuation orders for at least another month. Although the media stressed the significance of the vote, they say that if the Knesset does not pass the state budget by March, the government would fall and the disengagement plan would not go ahead.

This morning, Israel Radio cited a Fatah web site as saying that Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz and senior PA security official Muhammad Dahlan are expected to sign a document of understandings in a few days. Ha'aretz reported that the 500 Palestinian prisoners who will be released by Israel in the coming days include 44 Fatah members who were convicted of involvement in shooting or bombings. This is the first time since the Intifada began that people convicted of such offense have been released early.

Israel Radio reported that this morning a Qassam rocket was fired at a southern Gaza Strip settlement. Near Nablus, Palestinians shot at Israelis from a passing vehicle. There were no casualties.

Yediot cited the belief of IDF Intelligence that Hezbollah assassinated former Lebanese PM Rafiq Hariri, as a signal to Syrian President Bashar Assad that this is the fate of those who meddle with the Shi'ite organization. The army branch had initially assessed that Syria stood behind the hit. A "Syrian analyst" was quoted as saying in an interview with Jerusalem Post that Damascus is unmoved by the bombing, and that, knowing Syria's leaders, the start of an immediate withdrawal from Lebanon is unlikely to happen. Israel Radio reported that speaking to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Wednesday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice blamed Syria for having undermined stability in Lebanon.

Israel Radio reported that U.S. security coordinator Lt. Gen. William E. (Kip) Ward will meet today with Sharon, Mofaz and IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon. Leading media reported that Ward met with PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas on Wednesday.

Maariv cited the Committee of Settler Rabbis as saying following Wednesday's Knesset vote that the law paves the way in the future for the expulsion of Arabs from their homes in exchange for financial compensation. "The passing of the law is a legal precedent and a legal basis that establishes that in Israel it is legal to expel citizens from their homes in exchange for compensation," read the rabbis' statement, "even after the vote in the Knesset, that has no validity based on our sacred Torah."

Ha'aretz reported that a military committee appointed by Chief of Staff Ya'alon to examine the policy of house demolitions has recommended stopping them.

Leading media reported that newly appointed Jordanian ambassador to Israel Marouf al-Bakhit is expected to arrive in the country on Sunday.

Yated Ne'eman reported that Abbas has approved the application of the death penalty for Palestinians who were convicted of collaborating with Israel.

Jerusalem Post reported that John Dugard, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in the territories, Wednesday told the Knesset's Constitution, Justice and Law Committee that the IDF has destroyed 4,170 Palestinian homes since September 2000.

Major media reported on false alarms in Iran about an attack against the Bushehr nuclear reactor, and cited Israel's denial. Yediot quoted GOI spokesmen as saying that Israel "would not have missed" the reactor.

Ha'aretz reported that since 1967, tens of thousands of dunams (one dunam equals 0.22239 acres) of land have been purchased by the Jewish National Fund (JNF) in areas of strategic importance in the West Bank, near to the Green Line, which will be up for negotiations in the event of an Israeli withdrawal to the 1949-1967 armistice lines. According to its official policy, the JNF does not purchase lands beyond the Green Line.

Citing AP, Jerusalem Post reported that NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer will visit Israel next week, the first trip here by a leader of the Western military alliance.

Ha'aretz reported that the annual Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations opened in Jerusalem Wednesday amid criticism by the president of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, as well as other American Jewish officials and conference members, over the group's position regarding the disengagement plan. Yoffie said that the conference does not represent the majority of American Jews as long as it refrains from expressing unequivocal support for the plan. Jerusalem Post featured the gradual change of view of leading politically conservative American Jews towards acceptance of the disengagement plan and Palestinian statehood.

All media reported that Attorney General Menachem Mazuz is expected today to announce an indictment against Sharon's son, Knesset member Omri Sharon, and to close the investigation against PM Sharon in the case of the straw companies allegedly set up to raise and disburse funds for Ariel Sharon's 1999 primaries campaign.

All media dealt with ongoing squabbling in the military and among politicians following Defense Minister Mofaz's decision not to extend the tenure of IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon.

Jerusalem Post reported that Palestinian sources in Amman quoted Yasser Arafat's widow Suha, who lives in Tunis, as saying that the Tunisian security forces have thwarted at least five attempts on her life since her husband's death. Suha Arafat reportedly claimed that senior PA officials were behind the attempts to kill her, but that she did not elaborate.

A Maariv/Teleseker poll:

- "In your opinion, was Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon a successful chief of staff?" Yes: 75 percent; no: 10 percent.

- "In your opinion, was the decision made by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz to terminate Ya'alon's service justified or not?" Justified: 17 percent; unjustified: 64 percent.

11. Mideast:

Summary:

Liberal op-ed writer Yael Paz-Melamed commented in popular, pluralist Maariv: "Even if there are 10,000 people who disobey orders, opposite them will be hundreds of thousands of people who, with a heavy heart, will execute the disengagement orders." Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: "This newspaper has warily supported the disengagement plan and does not see a referendum as necessary.... Nevertheless, we recognize and respect the democratic

right of those who oppose the disengagement plan."

Block Quotes:

I. "Reconciliation is Already Here"

Liberal op-ed writer Yael Paz-Melamed commented in popular, pluralist Maariv (February 17): "The Right has accepted many things about which the Left used to rant and rave, the Left has accepted the indisputable leadership of Ariel Sharon. No, not all of the Right, and no, not all of the Left. On the fringes, wide as they may be, the rift is becoming deeper, but it is no longer between Right and Left, but between the extreme Right and the Left and Right, and between the extreme Left and the Left and Right. Contrary to all forecasts about how the people would be gripped by unbearable polarity, the opposite process has occurred. It is enough for us to remember what things looked like in the period between 1993, when the Oslo accords were conceived, and the Rabin assassination in 1995, and in the years to follow. Back then there was a real rift between the people, separating it into two halves. Israel back then was, for all intents and purposes, two states for two people, when each 'people' was seething with mounting anger towards the other.... All that has changed now, and will continue to change the closer disengagement draws, and most certainly after it is completed.... And even if there are 10,000 people who disobey orders, opposite them will be hundreds of thousands of people who, with a heavy heart, will execute the disengagement orders. Members of the Left and Right as one, with a single, common goal, and with the fraternity of citizens carrying out the political echelon's decisions, understanding that this is the basis of our lives here."

II. "The Due Process of Disengagement"

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (February 17): "This newspaper has warily supported the disengagement plan and does not see a referendum as necessary given the Knesset's well-established position under Israeli law as the sovereign representative of the popular will. Nevertheless, we recognize and respect the democratic right of those who oppose the disengagement plan, or believe it would be better carried out as the result of a direct vote by the general public, to campaign within the bounds of the law as fervently as they desire for a national referendum.... Opinion polls have shown most Israelis support disengagement, although this does not mean those numbers would translate into a referendum victory. Sincere supporters of a referendum must first convince this majority -- including us -- that a direct popular vote on this issue is the best way to continue on with this process, rather than it simply being used by those who oppose disengagement as a delaying tactic, or as an excuse to justify violent resistance against a legitimate government decision. So far, referendum supporters haven't made that convincing case -- and their time is running out fast."

12. Lebanon Bombing:

Summary:

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "There is zero tolerance in the only superpower around, under President George Bush's leadership, for Syria's unbridled terrorist behavior."

Block Quotes:

"The Syrians Forgot That 2005 Isn't 1976"

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (February 17): "By assassinating Hariri, Syria informed the Lebanese that it was the one that put an end to the civil war in exchange for a clearly noted price and, if that reward were taken away from Syria, the state of anarchy in Lebanon might mysteriously return. But the Syrians forgot that 2005 is not 1976. Back then their army invaded Lebanon (and has stayed there to this very day). Back then Syria was a regional power that

enjoyed the support of a nuclear superpower, the USSR. President Hafez Assad was in his prime and Lebanon was at its nadir. Syria used sophisticated methods of personal terrorization, exploited the conflicts between the various sects and enjoyed a substantial extent of world immunity. And the international media were still in the pre-satellite era. But there is zero tolerance in the only superpower around, under President George Bush's leadership, for Syria's unbridled terrorist behavior. Damascus is at a nadir now in terms of its military might and its regional status, Bashar Assad evinces weakness in every direction, and violent tyrants who oppress their own peoples and their surroundings, as in the Iraqi case, are no longer deemed legitimate. The seizure of Lebanon was always the greatest success chalked up by the Syrian regime, which was hung like a medal on its chest. Not any more. The definers of power, which have changed in the world towards democracy and human rights, are likely to turn Lebanon into the burial ground of the regime in Damascus."

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